DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 828 PS 019 649

AUTHOR Zambarano, Robert J.
TITLE Effects of Tone-of-Voice and Physical Punishment on Children's and Adults' Interpretation of a Brief Disciplinary Prohibition.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Adults; *Age Differences; *Attribution Theory; Children; *Corporal Punishment; *Cues; *Intonation; *Parent Child Relationship; Videotape Recordings

ABSTRACT

This study examines adults' and children's understanding of causal attribution cues in chaotic parent-child interactions. A total of 8 male and 8 female participants at each age of 4, 8, 12, and 18+ years, totaling 64 subjects, watched eight 30-second dramatized videotapes of a mother involved in some household task who discussed an issue with her child who was playing nearby. The parent-child interactions always involved the use of an ambiguous command to the child. Each episode ended with the command "Don't do that, just stop." With this command, changes in parental tone of voice, either angry or calm, and the use of physical punishment, with mother either spanking or not spanking her child, were manipulated to evoke different attributions and thus impart different discipline meanings. Subjects watched the tapes and indicated whether the ambiguous command referred to the mother's topic or to the child's play. As predicted, the manipulated parental behaviors provided clear information to adults. Children were confused, especially by the use of physical punishment. The results imply that parents are likely to mistakenly assume that such meaningful cues as yelling and physical punishment are well understood by their children. This research further demonstrates that parents would do best by speaking to their children clearly and carefully. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED332828

Effects of Tone-of-voice and Physical Punishment on Children's and Adults' Interpretation of a Brief Disciplinary Prohibition

Robert J. Zambarano
Dept of Psychology
University of Texas at Austin

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented at the bienial meeting of
The Society for Research in Child Development
April, 1991

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert J. Zambarano
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT

This study examines adults' and children's understanding of causal attribution cues in chaotic parent-child interactions. Eight male and eight female participants at each age 4, 8, 12, and 18+, watched dramatized video-taped parent-child interactions. The parent-child interactions always involved the use of an ambiguous command to the child. With this command, changes in parental tone-of-voice and the use of physical punishment were manipulated to evoke different attributions and thus impart different discipline meanings. Subjects watched the tapes and identified what the ambiguous command referred to. As predicted, the manipulated parental behaviors provided clear information to adults. Children were confused, especially by the use of physical punishment. The results imply that parents in chaotic situations may utilize such methods and mistakenly assume their meaning is clear to children.

PS 019649

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Parent-child interactions are often chaotic. Commands, instructions, prohibitions, and other parenting behaviors typically compete with other interactional foci (e.g., Holden, 1983). With competing attentional demands on a parent, positive responses to children decrease and negative responses increase (Zussman, 1980). Parents often use non-verbal and abbreviated verbal cues when communicating with their children; such cues may seem to adults to be efficient and effective, but they are not well understood by children (Saltz, Campbell, & Skotko, 1983; Henderson, Leone, & Loy, 1981). In particular, cues which act by evoking causal attributions may be confusing to children due to age differences in attributional skills (see Sedlak & Kurtz, 1981).

Attributions are a means of understanding causes of others' behavior. Attributions can be evoked by behaviors which are an unexpected or unusual change from the norm (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1986; Hastie, 1984; Wong & Weiner, 1981). Physical punishment and/or yelling are typically a change from a parent's normal behavior. A mother who yells or spanks may think she is producing the attribution in her child that "I am doing something which has caused mom to be angry". Yelling or spanking can be completed instantly, and such parenting behaviors require little thought and attention. Thus, these methods should be attractive. Unfortunately, making appropriate inferences from such parental behavior requires attributional skills that young children may not posses.

AIM: Determine if spanking and changes in tone-of-voice act as reliable indicators of meaning for adults and for children.

Consider a mother busy with a chore while discussing something with her child. The child is playing nearby. The mother says, "Don't do that". Does this command refer to the issue being discussed, or does it refer to the child's current play? If the mother's tone-of-voice changes when she issues such a command, or if she spanks the child, causal attributions should be evoked. Spanking or yelling is a salient effect - something must have occurred to cause

such behavior. Individuals with appropriate attributional skills should interpret the command as referring to the current actions of the child. The same command without yelling or spanking should be quite ambiguous. Individuals without the appropriate attributional skills (children) should find the command confusing regardless of any yelling or spanking.

Method

To test this analysis, sixty-four participants, eight from each gender at ages 4, 8, 12, and 18+, watched eight dramatized videotaped parenting events. Each thirty second episode followed the above example. The specific setting was different for each. The following parenting behavior factors were manipulated. A mother engaged in some household task is discussing an issue with her child (mother's topic), as background tone, this talk is either angry or calm. The child is playing nearby (child's play). Each episode ends when the mother says "Don't do that, just stop". As tone change, this is either said angrily or calmly. Then, the mother either spanks or does not spank the child.

For each of the eight specific settings, eight versions were created reflecting the eight possible combinations of the levels of the parenting behavior factors. Then, eight stimulus tapes were created using a Latin square combination approach, thus insuring that specific setting could not be a contributing factor. Also, episode order within each stimulus tape was randomly scrambled. After watching each episode, subjects indicated whether the command "Don't do that, just stop" referred to the mother's topic or the child's play.

Results

Data analysis followed the method of Grizzle, Starmer, & Koch, (1969), (X^2 is analogous to F). The interaction between tone change, spanking, and age reflects the predictions. $X^2(3, N=64)=51.84$. $p<.001$, (see Figure 1).

For adults, when tone changes they consistently select the child's behavior as the misdeed. When tone does not change but the child is spanked, again adults consistently select the child's behavior

as the misdeed. When no spank occurs and tone does not change, no consistent selection is made.

For 12-year-olds, tone change also produces consistent selection of the child's behavior as the misdeed. When tone is constant however, physical punishment no longer has such a clear cut effect although the selection tendency is in the same direction as for adults.

For 8 and 4-year-olds, the tendency to select the child's action as the misdeed when tone changes is still present, but the selection is no longer made on a consistent basis. Most importantly, there is no effect for spanking at these ages.

Conclusions

The data shows that parental behaviors which appear quite meaningful to adults do not provide the same information to children. In particular, the use of physical punishment to indicate the focus of an ambiguous command was completely ineffective for 4 and 8-year-olds. Furthermore, the use of shouting, while somewhat effective in reducing the ambiguity of the command, was clearly a much more powerful cue for adults and adolescents. The attributional model from which the initial predictions were made was supported.

Most importantly, these results indicate that parents are likely to mistakenly assume that such "meaningful" cues as yelling and physical punishment are well understood by their children. The use of these parenting behaviors, especially in chaotic situations, is quite understandable given the fact that adults see such behaviors as effective and efficient communication. Unfortunately for parents who would use such methods, this research further demonstrates that they would do best by speaking to their children clearly and carefully.

References

Einhorn, H.J. & Hogarth, R.M. (1986). Judging probable cause. Psychological Bulletin, 99, 3-19

Grizzle, J.E., Starmer, C.F., & Koch, G.G. (1969). Analysis of categorical data by linear models. Biometrics, 25, 489-504.

Hastie, R. (1984). Causes and effects of causal attributions. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46, 44-56.

Henderson, B.B., Leone, C.T. & Loy, L.L. (1981). Effects of explicitness of instructions on the generalization of a prohibition. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development.

Holden, G.W. (1983). Avoiding conflict: mothers as tacticians in the supermarket. Child Development, 54, 233-240.

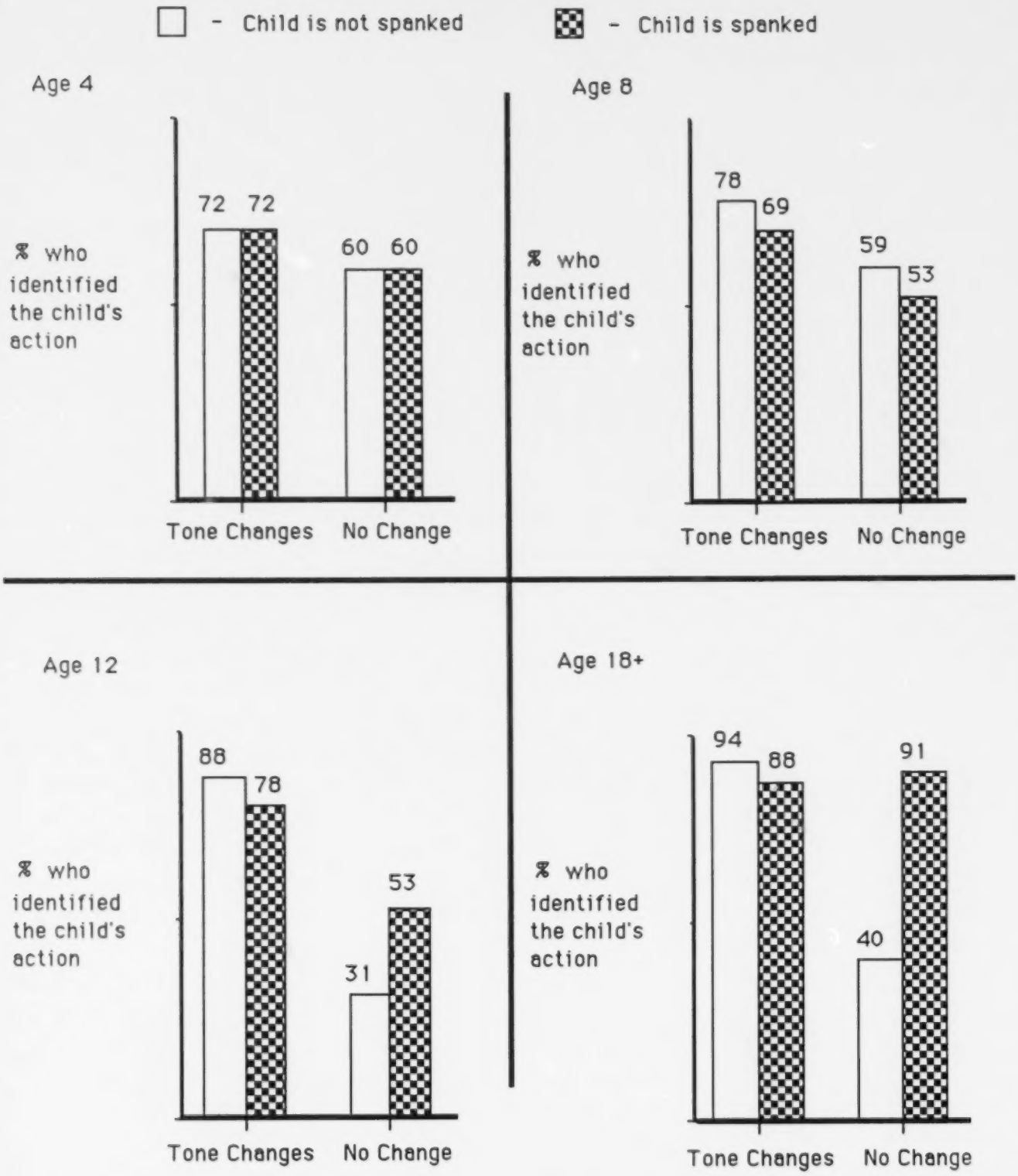
Saltz, E., Campbell, S. & Skotko (1983). Verbal control of behavior: the effects of shouting. Developmental Psychology, 19, 461-464.

Sedlak, A.J., & Kurtz, S.T. (1981). A review of children's use of causal inferenceprinciples. Child Development, 52, 759-784.

Wong,P.T.P., & Weiner, B. (1981). When people ask "why questions" and the heuristics of attributional search. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 40, 650-663.

Zussman, J.U. (1980). Situational determinants of parental behaviors: effects of competing cognitive activity. Child Development, 51, 792-800.

Figure One



Percentage of subjects who thought the child's action was the misdeed, as a function presence of physical punishment, change in tone-of-voice, and age of subject.